

CULTURE JAMMING: PERSPECTIVES BY INCONGRUITY AND POLEMICAL INTERTEXTUALITY

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Abstract: This paper aims to present culture jamming as a rhetorical practice (semantic activism). Culture jamming is an anticonsumerist resistance strategy, a countercultural tactic and a critical practice consisting in manipulation of media and other public discourses by artists and activists, in order to challenge the dominant memes, to subvert the mainstream (cultural, political and commercial) messages, using their own discourses and altering them to create alternative meanings. Culture jamming exploits intertextuality and counterframing, in different ways of deconstructing and re-constructing hegemonic messages, using allusion, irony and parody as polemical devices. Also, perspective by incongruity is used: oddly juxtaposed symbols that influence audiences to adopt new perspectives and create new insights. Cultural jammers are questioning the consumerist and corporate worldviews.

Keywords: Brandalism, demarketing, memes, Kalle Lasn, media hoaxes, subvertising

1. Introduction

There are advertisements and there are counter-advertisements. The latter are the result of an intervention which alters radically the original message: culture jamming. The culture jammers skilfully and maliciously mimic and undermine a wide variety of mainstream texts and images (advertisements, popular culture icons, slogans, logos, websites, etc.), usually in the form of *subvertising* (Nomai 2011: 150), which is the altering, more or less subtle, of the content of an advertisement, with the purpose of critically commenting the artefact using its own cultural code. Subvertising attacks everything from specific products, to advertisement techniques and consumer culture. Culture jamming can be expanded to media hoaxing: culture jammers lead journalists to believe they are presenting an authentic story when, in reality, the story is completely fabricated.

The San Francisco collage band Negativland first coined the term culture jam on the album *Jamcon '84* (Dery 1993 p. 9). Culture jamming is a polemical, postmodern practice, which derives from the Dada, surrealist and Situationist movements (Nomai 2011: 150), denouncing the "society of spectacle" (conceptualized by the French theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord in 1960s) in all its forms: news, propaganda, advertising and entertainment. The media spectacle displays images (representations) of reality or, in Debord disciple Jean Baudrillard's words, simulacra, which hypnotize and control people into a consumerist model of life. Guy Debord not only theorized the society of spectacle, as a consumerist artificial universe, but also promoted active intervention and subversion of the generalized spectacle, using *détournement* (reversal or diverting of the original meaning.)

Culture jamming, therefore, is the process whereby communicators articulate alternative perspectives that encourage people to reject or to ridicule dominant

discourses (Klein 2010: 281-282). However, critics of culture jamming principles and practices express distrust about the effectiveness of both the struggle against consumerism and the undermining the dominant ideologies (Cammaerts 2007; Carducci 2006; Heath and Potter 2005). Specifically, culture jamming, as a primarily rhetorical act, has been accused of lacking a real alternative to the establishment, of being essentially reactive and of displaying sheer cultural and political naivety. Moreover, there are legal issues concerning copywriting and property rights that cultural jammers tend to ignore or even to infringe.

2. Culture jamming, memes and counter-hegemonic tactics

Culture jamming can be defined as a “symbolic form of protest that targets central symbols of dominant discourses, deconstructs the discourses, and reintroduces the symbols in alternative contexts” (Wettergren 2005: 42). The key element of communication in culture jamming is the meme – the fundamental unit of cultural transmission. Memes are self-replicating messages, condensed images that stimulate visual, verbal, musical, or behavioural associations that people can easily imitate and transmit to one another. The Canadian author and activist Kalle Lasn, founder of Adbusters Media Foundation and editor of Adbusters magazine (devoted to anti-advertising), sees culture jamming as engaged in the “meme war”:

“A meme (rhymes with “dream”) is a unit of information (a catchphrase, a concept, a tune, a notion of fashion, philosophy or politics) that leaps from brain to brain to brain. Memes compete with one another for replication, and are passed down through a population much the same way genes pass through a species. Potent memes can change minds, alter behavior, catalyze collective mindshifts and transform cultures. Which is why meme warfare has become the geopolitical battle of our information age. Whoever has the memes has the power.” (Lasn 2000: 123)

Culture jammers challenge, disrupt, and replace the existing dominant memes. Lasn thinks that the best method for accomplishing this objective is the introducing of meta-memes, two-level messages that penetrate and destroy specific commercial images, in a way that challenges some broader feature of the culture of corporate power. Five of the most effective metamemes are:

“True Cost: In the global marketplace of the future, the price of every product will tell the ecological truth.

Demarketing: The marketing enterprise has now come full circle. The time has come to unsell the product and turn the incredible power of marketing against itself.

The Doomsday Meme: The global economy is a doomsday machine that must be stopped and reprogrammed.

No Corporate “I”: Corporations are not legal “persons” with constitutional rights and freedoms of their own, but legal fictions that we ourselves created and must therefore control.

Media Carta: Every human being has the “right to communicate”—to receive and impart information through any media” (Lasn 2000: 124).

Culture jamming is associated with different social movements, enabling people to think critically about social, cultural and economic dogmas and providing an ever-extending assortment of tactics (e.g. un-commercials, media hoaxes, hacking websites, billboard “liberation”, brand vandalism – brandalism, etc.).

The main mechanism of domination in media is the dynamic between distress and comfort memes (in news and advertisements):

“The first agenda of the commercial media is, I believe, to sell fear. What the “news” story of a busload of tourists gunned down in Egypt and the cop show about widespread corruption on the force have in common is that they contribute to the sense that the world is a menacing, inhospitable, untrustworthy place. Fear breeds insecurity – and then consumer culture offers us a variety of ways to buy our way back to security.” (Lasn 1999: 17)

This phenomenon is neutralized by cultural jammers through a couple of strategies: polemical intertextuality and perspective by incongruity, which redefine and reframe the meaning of media messages.

Culture jamming employs the strategy of polemical intertextuality by interpreting the original message through parodic or ironic intervention on it. The constitutive polemicity of culture jamming makes this undertaking explicitly and intrinsically intertextual. Culture jammers deviate or reverse dominant messages using intertextuality polemically, in order to reclaim the public space. The media texts from the public space are sites of ideological struggles over the dominant memes. The intertextuality of memes is constitutive, as well. Polemical intertextuality of culture jamming comes from the agonistic posture against the consumerist spectacle and the oppositional altering of the hegemonic discourses. This dialogic dimension points to the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin concept of heteroglossia: the parodical, ironical or polemical interaction of various social discourses and vocabularies (Jasinski 2001: 295-296). Thus, cultural jammers perform what we can call memetic bricolage and so they employ a carnivalesque intervention on (and against) the dominant discourses, neutralizing hegemonic memes. The media spectacle is denounced and overturned in the process of memetic polemical reappropriation. This conceptual dissidence takes the form of *détournement*, consisting in “rerouting spectacular images, environments, ambiances and events to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them” (Lasn 2000: 103).

Cultural jammers intentionally damage or distort the original message, in order to uncool it, making audiences see it in disturbingly new ways (perspective by incongruity). Perspective by incongruity is a concept coined by the American rhetorician Kenneth Burke, as a rhetorical strategy devised to disrupt the conventional norms by opening new perspectives. Burke intended to empower individual with interpretive tools to help them resist to the messages designed by advertisers, propagandists and other manipulative persuaders. The aim of the perspective by incongruity is to extend the use of a term by removing it from its original context and placing it in another, unusual one, in order to open different standpoints and expand the vision of the media messages users. Perspective by incongruity can be understood as an inventional resource which produces radical metaphors (Jasinski 2001: 434) used by cultural jammers. If *doxa* is the stereotypical and monological meaning conveyed by the dominant ideological discourses, perspectives by incongruity articulate *para-doxa* (Allen 2006: 91): the dialogic questioning and overturning of *doxa*. The discursive openings of the perspective by incongruity interventions are the result of a ludic, carnivalesque spirit of protest towards hegemonic authority by means of parody, irony and satire. The carnivalesque impulse removes hierarchies and abolishes conventional rules and practices (Jasinski 2001: 83).

The main tactic of culture jamming is the un-commercial: a professionally produced 30 second advertisement-like parody (spoof ad) aimed at demystifying the consumerist

ideology by empowering people to gain control over the dominant ideological assumptions.

3. Media Hoaxes, activism and digital tactics

Culture jamming attacks not only advertisements, but also news stories from mainstream media. News-oriented culture jamming usually takes the form of media hoax: a deliberately fabricated story intended to get media coverage, in order to expose journalistic flawed routines and stereotypes. For example, Joey Skaggs "Cathouse for dogs" hoax (Harold 2004: 194-195) or Yes Men hoax about Dow Chemical responsibility for the Bhopal accident (Carducci 2006: 122) are among the most notorious. Media pranks use memetic tactics to bypass the identification of their true intention and have remarkable viral potential (Rushkoff 1996: 258-259). A more recent example from Romania is the #Free Kekistan hoax, in which a teenager, who was displaying this message during an anti-governmental protest, was presented on a news TV station as a member of a far-right group. Television is a very effective medium for memes replication (Brodie 1996: 159) and, also, of meme-based hoaxes. The most potent media memes are those related with danger, food and sex. Culture jamming can also be used as a pedagogical device in media literacy (education), by emphasizing the constructedness and the ideological biases of media messages.

Artivism (art as activism) allows cultural jammers to resist and to fight against social conformity as the main outcome of the hegemonic discourses. It is a form of politically engaged artistic practice, expressing opposition to the mainstream art, to consumerism and to dominant ways of seeing. Artivism often shifts from conventions and innovates the repertoires of protest, using carnivalesque interventions in order to shock and surprise, to disrupt status quo and to bring about social change. However, there are points of criticism suggesting that artivism both diminishes the aesthetical dimension of art forms and sidetracks the real objectives of political protests.

Internet provides cultural jammers and activists with new resources, tools and repertoires of action and allows the movement to become global. Cyberjamming employs the online platforms as the most effective "meme-replicating mediums" (Lasn 1999: 132). There are several digital tactics used in digital culture jamming: cyberpetitions; virtual protests or sit-ins; spoof websites; Twitter storms; hacktivism (use of digital technologies to promote subversive meanings, challenging the mainstream rhetoric); mashup (a combination of pre-existing messages, created with audio or video editing online software to distort the original content). Social media play an important role in facilitating the replication of culture jamming internet memes.

As online tactical media activism, mashups are part of a more general culture jamming practice, whereby well-known media and consumerist discourses (advertisements, slogans, logos, texts, images, videos, music, speeches, and events) are remixed and/or ridiculed. Culture jammers hijack segments (samples) of dominant corporate and media culture with the aim of criticism, demystifying and emancipation. Tactical media activists "interrupt the mainstream discourse, borrow elements of mass culture and traditional media and reconstruct them in a new meaningful form to criticise the dominant political and social order" (Denisova 2019: 18) and to reframe the debate on social meaning.

4. Conclusions

Culture jamming is actively engaged in the production of anti-hegemonic ideas and meanings as it responds/retorts to the unidirectional communication from media, politicians and advertisers. This subversive practice involves the parodic reconfiguration of existing texts and images in order to infuse them with critical content. Although it has started as a reaction against corporate consumerism, culture jamming expanded its meaning to include all dominant memes in society. The cultural jammers reject the role of consumers and become producers of media messages, constructing new, alternative meanings, employing tools of mass media and marketing. Culture jamming appropriates existing cultural content and turns it into resistant and subversive material, aiming to attack and mock the original message.

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